

THE INDYPENDENT

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2025



KARA MCCURDY

MR. MAYOR?

ZOHRAN MAMDANI'S MAYORAL CAMPAIGN HAS AN ARMY OF SOCIALIST SUPPORTERS WHO ARE DREAMING BIG WITH HIM

BY JOHN TARLETON - P6

DON'T
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INDY BE
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FOR MORE SEE:
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THE INDYPENDENT



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EDITOR'S

NOTE



AROUND THE WORLD IN TWENTY PAGES

How would you like to travel around the world for less than the cost of a subway fare? Actually, for no cost at all.

In our final issue of 2024, we take you to:

The Daniel Penny trial in Lower Manhattan where longtime lawyer and activist Eileen Weitzman says the case against Jordan Neely's killer was sabotaged by the prosecution's excessive deference toward the former Marine, who was filmed placing the homeless Black street performer in a lethal chokehold for nearly six minutes.

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Washington, D.C., where Social Security — a financial lifeline for tens of millions of Americans — is at grave risk of being privatized by the incoming administration.

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The Central Asian petrostate Azerbaijan, where a major U.N. climate conference was recently held. With the world getting hotter and the climate more unhinged every year, rich nations and their fossil-fuel industry lobbyists faced off on one side with poor nations and climate activists on the other.

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Cuba, where the weight of U.S. economic sanctions weigh heavier every day on that socialist nation while activists here urge the Biden administration to ease the sanctions before leaving office.

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Cairo, Egypt where The Indypendent's Amba Guerguerian reports on the efforts of local residents who have formed mutual-aid groups outside of the eye of their dictatorial government to help Gazan refugees stay afloat.

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And back to New York City where we look at efforts by a cross-campus alliance of students at Columbia, NYU and the CUNY to claw back \$327 in annual tax breaks from the two very wealthy private universities. The money would be redirected to the cash-strapped CUNY system, which serves more than 200,000 students, mostly from poor and working-class families.

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And, we get the latest on our increasingly MAGAified mayor.

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That's only the half of it. We have a cover story (**PAGE 6**) on a candidate and a democratic-socialist movement that are shifting the mayor's race to

the left with bold, easy-to-understand proposals for addressing our city's cost-of-living crisis. We have Nicholas Powers (**PAGE 10**) reflecting on how neoliberal politicians drained the moral capital left by MLK Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement one "ATM withdrawal" at a time, Bennett Baumer (**PAGE 18**) on global economics, and more revelations from Reverend Billy's latest advice column (**PAGE 19**).

WHILE WE FREELY SHARE THIS PAPER with all who read it, we still have expenses to cover. And this time each year when we ask all our readers who can do so to chip in. When you give extra, you are standing in solidarity with those readers who can't afford to send us anything. From each according to their ability and to each according to their needs, as the saying goes.

Your donations cover our printing bills, which average out to about 10 cents per printed copy. It's an amazing bargain when you think of what's contained in these 20 pages. You also help cover the modest salaries of our small team of staffers and various incidental expenses that come with running a news organization, from website server fees to insurance for our outdoor news boxes. We can't do it without you. Whether you can give \$27, \$50, \$100, \$200, \$500, \$1,000 or more, it makes all the difference.

We need to reach \$40,000 in this year's winter fund drive to be on solid footing as we head into 2025. I haven't said the word "Trump" yet — I thought you might like a break — but we all know what's looming on the horizon.

As one legacy media company after another bends the knee and social media titans travel to Mar-a-Lago to pay homage to King Donald, one thing we can be certain of is that liberals are going to liberal. The left will be largely on its own, fighting to save everything that can be saved — and to carry forward the vision of a decent and humane society for all of us, not just a privileged few. If you think the next four years are going to be tough, imagine for a moment if *The Indy* isn't there to cover the movements that matter in a city that will be in the crosshairs of Trump and the MAGA movement.

Please give today so we can continue doing the work tomorrow, the next day and the day after.

You can go to [INDYPENDENT.ORG/DONATE](https://www.indypendent.org/donate) and make an annual contribution or sign up to become a monthly sustainer, which is a great way to spread your support across the year. You can also send a check or money order to THE INDYPENDENT//388 ATLANTIC AVENUE//BROOKLYN, NY 11217. Or hit that Indy QR code below.

Thank you from all of us for your support.

Onward,

John Tarleton

John Tarleton
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
THE INDYPENDENT



N.Y.C. BRIEFS

BY INDEPENDENT STAFF



ASH MARINACCO

CITY RETIREES OCCUPY UNION HQ TO PROTEST MEDICARE ADVANTAGE

New York State's highest court unanimously ruled on Dec. 7 the City must pay for any health-care plan it offers its retired employees, delivering another defeat to Mayor Adams' efforts to force retirees into for-profit Medicare Advantage plans. The Adams administration plans to appeal. The decision came the day after dozens of retired city workers occupied the lobby of District Council 37's headquarters after they were denied entry to a meeting between several city councilmembers and union leader Henry Garriido, one of several who agreed to privatize retirees' Medicare in exchange for raises for current workers. Garriido was trying to persuade the Councilmembers to oppose Manhattan Democrat Christopher Marte's bill that would require the city to keep paying for traditional Medicare plans. "These guys are basically following Trump's plan to convert all of Medicare into private operations," protester Phil Richman, 81, told *Work-Bites*. He said he found a good doctor to treat his leukemia only because he had traditional Medicare — unlike his brother on Medicare Advantage, who "died before the medication came." Marte's bill, however, has not been cosponsored by any of his 17 colleagues in the Progressive Caucus, while three of the Council's Republicans have signed on.

TEXAS AG SUES NY DOCTOR OVER ABORTION PILLS

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton filed a lawsuit Dec. 12 against a New York doctor for dispensing abortion pills via telehealth to a 20-year-old woman in the Dallas suburbs. Accusing Dr. Maggie Carpenter of New Paltz of violating Texas's abortion ban and practicing in Texas without a license, he is seeking an injunction to keep her from "defiantly" violating Texas law and a \$100,000 fine for every violation. The suit sets up a battle between states that are trying to prevent women from getting abortions from out-of-state doctors and the 22 states with "shield" laws intended to protect those doctors from out-of-state prosecution. The Abortion Coalition for Telemedicine, which Dr. Carpenter co-founded, said Paxton was "prioritizing his anti-abortion agenda over the health and well-being of women by attempting to shut down telemedicine abortion nationwide."

BAN ON BROKER FEES BECOMES LAW, LANDLORD GROUP SUES

The FARE Act, which bans landlords who hire real-estate brokers from passing the fees onto new tenants, became law Dec. 14 after Mayor Adams neither signed nor vetoed the measure within 30 days of it passing. It will go into effect in June. "After too many decades under an unfair and suffocating system, New Yorkers can be free from the forced broker fee," Councilmember Chi Ossé (D-Brooklyn) said in a statement. Fees as much as 15% of a year's rent for a \$2,500-a-month apartment add as much as \$4,500 to the first month's rent and security deposit. The Real Estate Board of New York, a landlord trade group, filed a challenge to the law on Dec. 16, arguing that it interfered with owners' constitutional rights to enter into contracts. Ossé told *Gothamist* the suit was "a last desperate attempt by the real-estate lobby."

IN NY HARRIS LOST MORE VOTES THAN TRUMP GAINED

Kamala Harris carried New York by a significantly smaller margin than Joe Biden did in 2020. She received 55.9% of the vote to Donald Trump's 43.3%, down from Biden's 61.9%–37.7% margin. But Harris's 4.6 million votes were 625,000 fewer than Biden's total, while Trump gained around 325,000. In the Bronx Harris lost more than 90,000 votes while Trump gained 30,000. In Brooklyn Harris lost more than 100,000 votes while Trump gained 30,000. Meanwhile, 278,000 people voted for Harris on the Working Families Party line, enough to keep its ballot line for another two years. The Green Party's Jill Stein led write-in candidates with 46,700 votes, 0.6% of the total. In New York's 10th congressional district, Hind Rajab, a six-year-old Palestinian girl who made global headlines when she was killed by IDF soldiers in Gaza, received 1,284 write-in votes and finished fourth behind Dan Goldman (D-Manhattan), an ardent Zionist who has aggressively backed the Gaza genocide. Altogether Rajab received more than 2,044 votes across multiple New York congressional districts.

IT'S ONLY FARE: Chi Ossé (D-Brooklyn) is the lead sponsor of the *The FARE Act*, which bans landlords who hire real-estate brokers from passing the fees onto new tenants.



Amy Goodman



Juan González



Nermeen Shaikh

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WORD ON THE STREET

BY INDYPENDENT STAFF

NANETTE WHETSTONE SOUNDVIEW

I first came across *The Independent* at WBAI when I went there to pick up a premium. That was five or six years ago. I've been reading the paper ever since.

And now I help distribute it at a library in my community, in the basement laundry room in my apartment building, and in the laundry rooms in other neighboring apartment buildings.

I want to share what I'm learning from *The Independent*. I learn so much about how people are responding to inequalities — to all the racism, sexism and homophobia. And the writing is so good. I get the meat of what people are feeling. When I have conversations with people who don't read press like *The Independent*, I feel like I'm getting such total misinformation.

AMANDA VENDER JACKSON HEIGHTS

I'm an adopt-a-box volunteer because it's a simple way I can contribute to independent journalism in my community, where I work as a public school teacher. The boxes in my neighborhood are located in areas I often pass by: the library and the post office. I check them and make sure they look attractive and clean and that they're filled only with *Indys*. If there's an issue of special importance to my community, I help get extra bundles out in the neighborhood.

Like so much of New York City, mine is a neighborhood of working people and many immigrants. *The Indy* is the paper that speaks to our issues without corporate influence. *The Indy* validates the experiences of working people and contributes to building a grassroots movement for social justice.

If you walk or bike in your neighborhood, please consider becoming an adopt-a-box volunteer so that more people have free access to *The Indy*.

LEW FRIEDMAN PARK SLOPE

I'm a New Yorker. I was born and raised here. I used to distribute underground newspapers in the East Village in the early 1970s. I also used to read the old *Guardian* newspaper for many years before it crashed in the early 1990s. *The Independent* is following in the footsteps of papers like that.

I've been helping out for years as a box steward. I make sure their boxes on Fifth and Seventh avenues stay tidy and have a display copy in the window. When a box gets low, I have extra bundles at my house that I use to restock it. I also drop off the paper at venues in Park Slope where people know me.

I go to the Park Slope Food Co-op regularly. You can't put papers out in the

co-op, but I always have a few extra copies in my backpack. When I see friends, I make sure they get one. I also take the paper to protests to hand out. People appreciate it because it gives them the information they want.

HANK DOMBROWSKI SOHO

I'm an artisanal woodworker and a rent-stabilized tenant who builds things like furniture, tables and bookshelves for people's homes. My dad worked at a bearing factory in New Britain, Connecticut, and belonged to a union. I remember when he and the other workers would go on strike. My mom was a nurse in a hospital who was hunched over well before retirement from lifting so many patients. This bred an interest in me wanting to know what's going on with the working class.

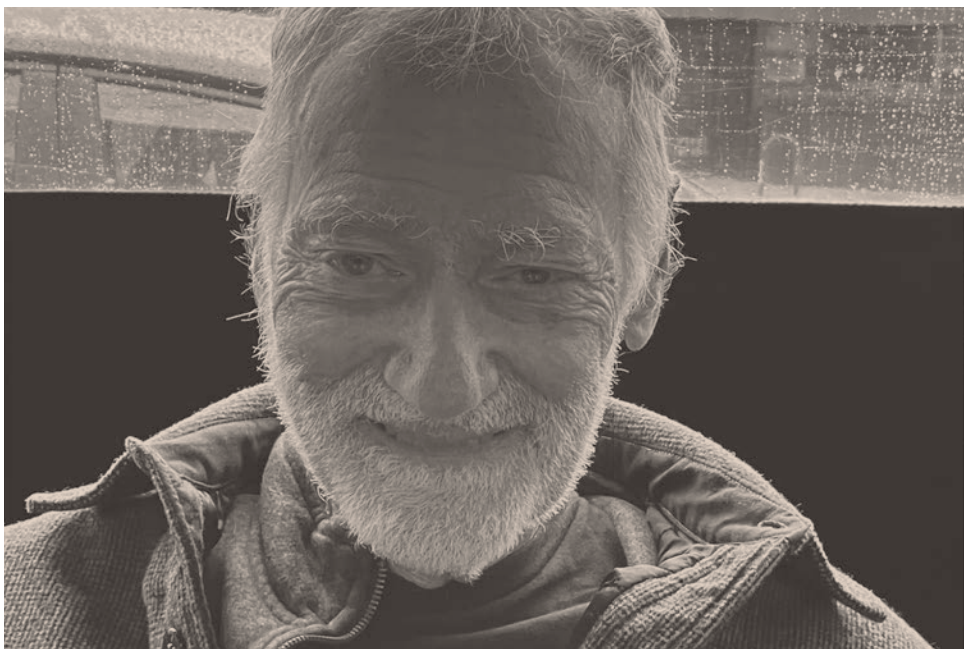
When I first came across *The Independent* more than 20 years ago, I felt like I was getting accurate information, and I liked that it was local. I also liked that *The Indy* was not interested in maintaining a docile population of readers.

With the mainstream media, no matter what station you watch or newspaper you pick up, the ways they frame issues seem the same: The stock market went up so the economy is doing great; the U.S. government bombs other countries because we're fighting for freedom; protesters are annoying troublemakers who deserve whatever the cops do to them. I want media that goes to people who are actually experiencing the issues and talks to them. And *The Indy* is really good at that.

I've been an *Indy* box steward in my neighborhood since 2018. I also take papers to the bookstore and the library nearby. I think it's good to do whatever you can to support organizations that are fighting for your beliefs.

Over the past few years, I've been fixing up *Indy* news boxes that have been damaged or tagged with stickers and graffiti. For graffiti, I use lacquer-based cleaners or acetone. For stickers, I use solvents to dissolve the glue that binds the stickers to the box. To prevent future problems, I put silicone on the windows to make it harder for stickers to stick.

I fix boxes on the spot when I can. If they need more work, I take them up to my workshop in Connecticut. When I put a refurbished box back on the street, it says, "We're here. This newspaper is for all of us. And we're not going away."



WHY DANIEL PENNY WALKED

BY EILEEN WEITZMAN

On Dec. 9, after a trial that lasted over six weeks, Daniel Penny, a white man, was acquitted of manslaughter in the second degree and for the criminally negligent homicide of Jordan Neely, a Black man. On May 1, 2023, Penny held Neely in a chokehold on the subway for nearly six minutes, including for almost a minute after Neely lay motionless. Neely died from compression of his neck as a result of the chokehold, a New York City medical examiner testified during the trial.

Penny's defense attorneys made fear a key element of their legal strategy. Appealing to the predominantly white jury's fear of subway crime in their opening statement, they claimed Penny "did for others what we would want someone to do for us." In their closing statement, they asked jurors to imagine they were in that subway car when Neely entered and started screaming and reminded jurors about witnesses' accounts of how fearful they were.

The State's attorneys never questioned the reasons behind this fear. They even proudly admitted the fear was reasonable, conceding that Neely was "understandably frightening." The prosecutors made several strategic mistakes. In addition to pandering to fear, they said Penny was justified in taking Neely down and holding him in a chokehold until the next subway stop. Once the prosecution made that concession, there were only 51 seconds during which Penny's actions could be deemed criminal.

The prosecution's attorneys argued Penny should have released Neely at that time because the other passengers had left the train, and there was no longer a justifiable reason to maintain the chokehold. They called witnesses who testified that during those 51 seconds, Penny wouldn't stop choking Neely, even though bystanders were telling him to let go.

But the prosecutors also called a number of witnesses who testified about their fear of Neely, including a white woman who said she was sure she was going to be killed — even though others testified that Neely never threatened any individuals and didn't have any weapons.

The prosecutors didn't manage to capture the jury's sympathy for Neely, a man who, in his last few living acts, threw his jacket on the ground and shouted that he was hungry and thirsty. Yet they deemed Penny a peaceful, calm, honorable man, reminding jurors of his character witnesses' testimony during their closing argument. Rhetorically asking why someone with such characteristics might be reckless with Neely, the prosecutors' answer was that Penny didn't recognize him as human.

According to the rules of evidence, the prosecution wasn't allowed to call character witnesses on Neely's behalf, because that would not be considered "relevant." However, the defense was allowed to call witnesses to negatively characterize Neely's mental state once the judge ruled his mental-health records could be part of its case.

Neely was a human being worthy of support and sympathy from the jury, the prosecution should have argued. That also might have helped downplay the fear. But the prosecutors didn't speak about how Neely was loved by his family, that he was an accomplished street performer. Nor that he was a homeless Black man in a mental-health crisis who was calling out for food and help when Penny attacked him from behind. I suppose the latter would have put too much blame on the City — Neely's struggles were so considerable that he was on the City's "Top 50" list of people in need of services.

After deliberating for five days, the jury bought the defense's argument that Neely died due to a sickle-cell crisis compounded by K2 use and a psychotic

episode. To discount the medical examiner's findings that Neely died from the chokehold, the defense hired a forensic pathologist who revealed that if he had agreed with the medical examiner, his contract with the defense would have been terminated.

The prosecutors' reference to many studies indicating that sickle cell was not the cause of death in similar situations didn't manage to overcome their weak, fearful and confusing strategy.

With the media and the mayor constantly hyping up subway crime, it's no wonder that playing to white fear was a winning ploy. Adams, a former police captain, has continually increased the number of subway police. This despite recent statistics finding only 2.5% of the city's violent index crimes occur on the subway and just one felony assault is reported on the subway for every two million trips.

In April, Adams approved the hiring of an additional 1,200 cops. This after Gov. Hochul had in March deployed 750 National Guard soldiers and 250 New York State Police and MTA Police combined to patrol the city's subways. The National Guard is only supposed to be used for responses to emergencies such as natural disasters, riots etc., but politicians have reelections and their own agendas to think of.

This "protection" is widely understood as protection from mainly Black and Brown folks. In the fourth quarter of 2022, 93% of those arrested for fare evasion were Black and Brown people, who comprise only 53.7% of New York City's population. On the other hand, whites make up 40% of NYC's population but only 6% of the total arrest rate.

After Penny was indicted, over \$3 million was raised for his defense fund. His white-supremacist and MAGA followers came out for him at the trial. "Daniel's a good guy, and New York's mob district attorney tried to ruin his life for having a backbone," commented vice president-elect J.D. Vance. His use of "backbone" refers to MAGA's views that a white person who wants to or fears a Black person has the right to kill them. This is the history and foundation upon which the United States exists and what this trial was all about: White people believing they can do anything, including murder, to protect their race from Black people.

Penny's acquittal was legal reconfirmation that Black people can still be killed with impunity and without any legal consequences.

"I'll take a million court appearances and people calling me names and people hating me just to keep one of those people from getting killed or hurt," Penny said after the trial. But he had no problem killing Neely to "protect" them.

The lame public response of Neely's supporters should be concerning to readers. Not many folks attended the trial nor the demonstrations outside. A few after-the-verdict demonstrations were small.

If you haven't been showing up, there's still time. Show up for other actions against the verdict. But also come out against the newest stage of the war on Black, Brown and Indigenous folks, as well the poor, disabled, immigrants and other marginalized groups, commencing on Jan. 20. Come out against fascism, law and order, and the impoverishing of society for the benefit of a few billionaires. They're depending on fear to accomplish what they want. Organize your peers, families and communities, and don't be afraid. Power concedes nothing without struggle!

Eileen Weitzman is an attorney, artist and social activist who witnessed the Penny trial regularly. She works with The People Fightback, People's Senate, International Campaign to Free Kamau Sadiki, and the Spirit of Mandela Coalition.



GARY MARTIN



RICHARD SWAFFORD

MAKE NY

ZOHRAN MAMDANI IS RUNNING ON BOLD SOLUTIONS TO NEW YORK'S COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS. AND, HE HAS A MOVEMENT BEHIND HIM

BY JOHN TARLETON

Late on a frigid Saturday afternoon in December, Assemblymember Zohran Mamdani climbed up on a bench and looked over a crowd of around 20 protesters. Midtown's empty glass office towers rose high above him. To his side was a statue of an early-20th-century garment worker bent over a sewing machine. Throngs of people in Santa Claus suits surged by on the sidewalk, oblivious to the earnest young politician who was speaking. It was Mamdani's 18th and final campaign event in another whirlwind week of striving to be elected New York City's next mayor. On this occasion he was speaking to supporters of death row inmate Billie Allen, whose life could be spared by a presidential pardon in the waning days of the Biden Administration.

"It is in the hands of President Biden to ensure that Billie does not suffer the same fate as so many prior," Mamdani's voice boomed out over the crowd. "There is no person who deserves to be executed by this government."

A few minutes later Mamdani disappeared into the twilight.

"You have to be physically present in New Yorkers' lives," Mamdani told *The Independent* later. "You have to show up where they are practicing capital 'P' politics and where they are just gathering with their friends in their neighborhood."

■ ■ ■



RICHARD SWAFFORD

RUNNING AS A CANDIDATE of the Democratic Socialists of America, Mamdani, 33, was first elected to the State Assembly from Astoria, Queens, in 2020, defeating a five-term incumbent who had the full backing of the Democratic Party machine. Since then he has emerged as an energetic and effective legislator who excels at constituent service and has helped lead winning fights for laws to expand publicly owned utilities and to establish a pilot project for free bus routes for working-class New Yorkers.

If elected, Mamdani would be New York City's first socialist mayor. He has used his campaign so far to define the "S" word in the most appealing way possible — as a source of relief for the city's inflation-ravaged multiracial working class. His headline proposals — a four-year rent freeze for New York's two million rent-stabilized tenants, free bus fares and free universal child-care for all children up to age six — would ease the affordability crisis for millions of working-class New Yorkers. On Dec. 12 Mamdani called for city-run grocery stores to be placed in each borough. Freed from profit motives and price gouging seen at corporate-run grocery stores, he says, public grocery stores could deliver lower prices.

"Too often the scale of proposals put forward by politicians are not commensurate with the crisis working-class people are facing," Mamdani said.

Mamdani has raised over \$350,000 since entering the race. Much of that haul will qualify for 8-to-1 public matching funds from a city program that rewards candidates who garner donations of up to \$250 from New York City residents. In addition to showing up at community events in every corner of the city, he has shown a knack for creating viral moments that reach a larger mass audience.

On Nov. 3 Mamdani ran the New York Marathon from start to finish wearing a T-shirt that read "Eric Adams Raised My Rent" on the front and "Zohran will freeze it" on the back. Days after the election Mamdani released a video of himself conducting on-the-street interviews in a pair of immigrant neighborhoods in Queens and the Bronx that swung heavily to Trump. While anguished Democratic Party talking heads debated each other on cable news, Mamdani listened to voters talk about their



MICHAEL PAULSON

NYC AFFORDABLE AGAIN

frustrations with the high cost of living and the war on Gaza and shared what he found. The video ultimately went viral, gaining 2.8 million views on social media.

“He’s being more proactive than all of his competitors combined,” says Michael Lange, a New York City political operative and author of the *The Narrative Wars* on Substack.

ON THE SAME DAY Mamdani spoke at the Billie Allen rally, more than 50 of his supporters gathered in 32-degree weather outside the Brooklyn Museum. Less than six weeks removed from the presidential election and more than six months out from the Democratic mayoral primary, they were preparing to knock on doors and urge voters to believe that a more just and humane version of this city is possible. Most of them were members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Mamdani’s political home.

“I’m pregnant, and I want to have affordable childcare so I can afford to stay in the city,” said one volunteer.

“I want to be in favor of something for once,” said another.

“I want to feel something again,” added a third.

DSA has wrested nine state legislative seats, including Mamdani’s, from the New York Democratic Party establishment since 2018, and its elected officials now represent more than one million New Yorkers in Albany. The group’s go-to strategy has been to mobilize its thousands of passionately committed members, flood the zone with volunteer door-to-door canvassers, and simply outwork and outthrust their better financed opponents. They are now looking to scale up this model to a citywide level with a goal of knocking on one million doors for Mamdani’s campaign.

“We’re going to be spreading the message of socialism and racial justice across New York City on a massive scale,” Sid, a DSA field organizer, told a group of volunteers during a short training session before they fanned out in teams of two to canvass in nearby Crown Heights.

In that same moment, New York City DSA was also launching door-to-door canvasses in the East Village, Bushwick, Kensington, Flatbush, Astoria, Jackson Heights and Parkchester.

I tagged along with a pair of canvassers, Julie and Jasmin, whose “turf” consisted of three six-story walk-up apartment buildings on Carroll Street in the heart of Crown Heights. Julie, a public-sector tech worker, was a veteran of many New York City DSA canvasses. Jasmin had done political canvassing in Chicago before moving to New York six years ago to pursue her writing career. She said she was moved to act by the genocide in Gaza and her disgust with Mayor Adams.

Julie used a Mini-VAN app on her phone that told her the names and ages of registered Democratic Party voters and guided her to their apartments. The march to knock on a million doors was under way.

At the first home, a woman named Esperanza was too ill to make it to the door, and her husband didn’t speak English. At the second door, Emily said she appreciated the effort but was about to head out and couldn’t talk. At the third door, the tenants said they had no interest in politics. We continued upstairs. On the third floor, Jasmin managed to briefly speak with a tenant who took a palm card with the highlights of Mamdani’s platform. When the two canvassers’ tour of the building was done, 17 doors had been knocked on, and one conversation had occurred.

Julie was undiscouraged. “It’s a numbers game,” she explained.

Her optimism would soon be rewarded. In the next two buildings, more residents were willing to engage. Much of the enthusiasm came from white progressives. On back-to-back doors, first Sarah and then Andrea made their views on Eric Adams’ re-election bid known: “Not

him!” Neither had heard of Mamdani, but they liked his promise to freeze the rent on their rent-stabilized apartments for the next four years. They took the palm cards and promised to use the QR code on the card to find out more about his campaign. Julie reminded them that if they made a \$10 donation, it would mean \$80 in city matching funds as well.

The promise of free universal childcare resonated with several parents of small children. One older Latina voter said free childcare would make a big difference for her daughter, who was away at work, and her granddaughter. “I believe you have to vote,” the woman said. “It’s important.”

By the end of the three-hour shift, Julie and Jasmin had knocked on 51 doors, engaged in nine political conversations and identified one “yes” voter and eight “maybes” for their candidate. Altogether the Mamdani campaign announced that more than 300 volunteers had turned out at the eight canvass sites and had knocked on more than 7,300 doors.

When I asked Julie at the end of the shift why she had come out on a bitterly cold weekend day to do this volunteer work, she mentioned that she and her partner were looking to start a family. The cost of childcare would determine whether they would have to abandon the city.

Still, I wondered, at a time when many disillusioned liberals are forswearing activism, where do she and her fellow democratic socialists find the resolve to try something bigger than they have ever tried before?

“The Democrats have failed us for a second time,” Julie said. “I think there is a lot of energy for something different. Zohran is offering that. That’s why there’s 50–60 people here on a frigid day in December.”

MAMDANI’S CAMPAIGN HAS DEFINED SOCIALISM AS A SOURCE OF RELIEF FROM INFLATION FOR THE WORKING CLASS

THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA was founded in 1982. For much of its history, DSA was a genteel refuge for socialists who sought to pull the Democrats to the left but wanted nothing to do with the various sectarian groups that populate the far left in this country. The group’s ranks swelled starting in 2016 when Bernie Sanders popularized the idea of “democratic socialism” with his youthful supporters in his primary run against Hillary Clinton and again when Donald Trump upset Clinton to win the White House.

DSA is the largest socialist organization in the United States in at least 80 years. Its New York City chapter is its largest local chapter with more than 6,500 members. It helped Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez win her congressional seat in 2018. It has also elected nine of its members to the New York state legislature and two more to the New York City Council while building a growing presence in the labor movement. It’s sparing in who it endorses, but when it backs a candidate, it goes all in with providing volunteers and campaign expertise.

“We can start thinking bigger. We can start being more ambitious,” said NYC-DSA’s Alex Pellitteri. “All of the races that we have done have really been leading up to this and have been preparing our volunteers and given them a level of expertise and commitment.”

“I’ve been thinking about this like a structure test,” said Claire Valdez, who served as NYC-DSA’s membership coordinator before being elected to the State Assembly from Queens in November. “We’re gonna learn a lot about the organization, and we’re gonna learn a lot about our capacity.”

“Everyone in New York City politics knew DSA had a base, and now we’re seeing that crystallize,” said Michael Lange.

Mamdani begins with the largest base of any of the six candidates in the primary outside of Mayor Adams and Comptroller Brad Lander, who have both won citywide races. The question, Lange asks, is how high Mamdani’s ceiling is. He noted that Mamdani will benefit from having millions of dollars in matching funds to promote his message in a way no previous DSA candidate has and that he’s good on television. If his pro-rent-freeze message sinks in with New York City’s two million rent-stabilized tenants, that could pull in more support, Lange added.

Mamdani is also the first South Asian and Muslim candidate to run for mayor. Jaslin Kaur, a former DSA City Council candidate in Eastern Queens, says Mamdani is already seen as a “hero” in the South Asian community for going on hunger strike for 15 days in 2022 to help win hundreds of millions of dollars in debt relief for financially stressed taxi drivers like her father.

“If we can really see a campaign that represents the community come out, and really show that it’s investing in outreach, it’s going to be really exciting,” Kaur told *The Independent*.

While it will take a lot for Mamdani to prevail over his better-known opponents and the inevitable hostility of wealthy special interests, should he catch fire and become a real threat to win, he says the underlying strategy is simple.

“New Yorkers want vision, clarity and an agenda that directly addresses the most pressing issues in their lives,” he said. “And I think our campaign does exactly that.”

LIFE & DEATH:

Mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani speaks at a rally in the Garment District in support of federal death row inmate Billie Allen.

READY, SET, GO:

DSA members hold a short training session outside the Brooklyn Museum before canvassing in Crown Heights.

GETTING

ORGANIZED: More than 300 DSA members attended a Dec. 4 mass meeting at the First Unitarian Congregational Society in Brooklyn.

COLUMBIA & NYU'S \$327 MILLION TAX BREAK TARGETED BY CROSS CAMPUS ALLIANCE

THE MONEY WOULD GO TO THE CASH-STRAPPED CITY OF NEW YORK UNIVERSITY INSTEAD

BY ERIC SANTOMAURO-STENZIL

The Fairway supermarket near the West Harlem waterfront was once a staple for the local community, and the area was long the subject of some Harlemites' ambition for economic development. But when the 2.2-acre property on 12th Avenue north of West 125th Street went up for sale in 2022, Columbia University bought it for \$84 million in cash, connecting its controversial Manhattanville campus expansion to the Hudson River waterfront.

That upfront cost was likely easier to swallow because, by state constitutional law, Columbia won't have to pay property taxes on the land once it is converted to educational use. If Columbia were to begin developing the property in 2026, the university would save \$12.19 million in property taxes over the following decade, based on an *Independent* review of the property's tax records, and would be in the position to continue reaping the benefits of its tax exemption many more decades into the future. The Manhattanville expansion adds to the holdings of what is already the city's largest private real-estate owner with a portfolio of more than 320 properties worth almost \$4 billion — and \$182 million a year in tax exemptions, *The New York Times* estimated in September 2023. Downtown, New York University benefits from \$145 million in annual exemptions. At Columbia, graduate school costs around \$90,000 a year, and at both schools, the overwhelming majority of students do not come from the city or state.

Meanwhile, the cash-strapped City University of New York system works to serve over 200,000 students, the majority of whom are low-income and non-white New Yorkers, with broken elevators and overworked professors. Many students work while studying to make ends meet.

Those "stark" contrasts, Assemblymember and mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani (D-Queens) said, are what led him to introduce a bill called the Repeal Egregious Property Accumulation and Invest it Right (REPAIR) Act last year. The measure would tax institutions with over \$100 million in property-tax exemptions. If the legislation and requisite state constitutional amendment pass, only NYU and Columbia would be affected, redistributing about \$327 million directly to CUNY annually, advocates say.

Mamdani says that when he speaks to fellow legislators, their first reaction is usually shock at the disparities and that the schools don't pay property taxes. The legislation, sponsored in the State Senate by John Liu (D-Queens), has four cosponsors there and 12 in the Assembly.

At a Nov. 10 rally in Washington Square Park, Mamdani and City Comptroller Brad Lander, a fellow mayoral candidate, joined the NYC Union of Students to call for enacting the legislation.

"Resist! REPAIR! Make NYU pay their share!" the crowd of around 70 people chanted.

Founded earlier this year after a community organizing "summer camp" that brought together college students from across the city, the NYC Union of Students aims to build a coalition of students at both private and public universities working toward the goals of student democracy, equity in educational resources and having schools serve the city's communities.

"Being able to be in a room together is really important," said Erin Lawson, a recent NYU graduate who is the REPAIR campaign director.

Many of the union's organizers forged connections through last year's student protests against Israel's assault on Gaza, and several have organized with the Young Democratic Socialists of America.

The union is developing locals at individual schools while holding cross-school events to build community and prepare for the campaign. Organizers emphasized that they are running the union bottom-up, embodying the democracy they

want out of their institutions.

With a Brooklyn College bachelor's degree under her belt, organizer Johanna von Maack was set to graduate with a second degree from Hunter College this past spring. But because of inadequate funding and staffing at the CUNY schools, she says, the last class she needed to finish wasn't offered in the spring, so she's taking it this semester.

"I know people that are in their fifth or sixth year," von Maack said. "It's because there are just not enough sections being offered for them to graduate on time."

After decades of budget cuts and underfunding, students say broken infrastructure is common throughout the CUNY system. Some escalators are blocked off; they see rodents in buildings; and not all the bathrooms are fully functional.

Baruch College student Meeks Samuel, a member of the union, said she's been stuck in an elevator multiple times. Once, she said, the elevator dropped a couple of floors. Afterwards, another person on the elevator lodged a complaint, but the rest went on with their day.

"It's a mix of frustration, but also a lot of apathy," Samuel said of the campus culture around the issues. Along with classmates and professors, organizers have tabled, posted flyers, and are hosting political-education events to engage the broader school community.

Brooklyn College anthropology professor Naomi Schiller, a member of the Professional Staff Congress, the union local that represents 30,000 faculty and staff at CUNY, spoke at the rally. She said the poor conditions are sometimes "normalized" among students. While she's lucky enough to have tenure, the "adjunctification" of CUNY has led to many of her colleagues only earning about \$5,000 per class, with little job security, and some rushing between jobs at different campuses.

The REPAIR push comes after the New Deal for CUNY campaign, an unsuccessful attempt to return the system to the tuition-free status it had before 1976. At a federal level, Republicans passed a bill in 2017 to tax endowments at universities with assets exceeding \$500,000 per student.

Columbia used eminent domain to acquire most of the Manhattanville campus site in the late 2000s. State Sen. Cordell Cleare, who represents Harlem and is a cosponsor of the REPAIR Act, introduced a bill in April that would prohibit the state urban development corporation from participating in the Manhattanville project. Mamdani said he was not familiar with the bill, which the Senate did not hold hearings on.

"REPAIR is a vital step toward years of private universities using eminent domain as a weapon for greed instead of a public interest," said Kai Cogsville, a Harlem-based advocate for Cleare's legislation.

REPAIR advocates say they're preparing to ratchet up the pressure on legislators and administrators in the coming months. "We're not gonna give up until we get what we want," Lawson said.

NYU and Columbia did not respond to *The Independent's* requests for comment by the time this article was published.

PRISTINE: The Columbia campus looking toward Low Memorial Library.

UNDERFUNDED: A broken escalator at the City College of New York, located in Harlem one mile north of Columbia.



ERIC SANTOMAURO-STENZIL



ERIC SANTOMAURO-STENZIL

POLICING, REAL ESTATE AND NYC'S MAGA MAYOR

COULD A PARDON FROM DONALD TRUMP REVIVE ADAMS' POLITICAL FORTUNES?



COURTESY

BY TOM ANGOTTI

Shortly after it was known that Eric Adams is facing federal charges for corruption, something happened that could give him a get-out-of-jail card. Donald Trump, a master at evading corruption charges, claimed victory in his bid for a second term in the white house. Adams, a Democrat, and Trump, a Republican, are both entrenched law-and-order advocates who are accused of corruption. They are expected to meet soon.

For Adams, this could mean a get-out-of-jail-free card and a clearer path toward a second term as mayor. For Trump, it could relieve some of the antipathy toward him emanating from his hometown and the African-American community. More broadly, a reconciliation between Adams and Trump could allow Adams to continue dodging criticisms for the NYPD's overly aggressive policing and the City's treatment of migrants, and it could boost the mayor's chances for a second term. At the same time, a Trump endorsement of Adams may very well help Trump continue to thumb his nose at the New York-based opposition.

Many progressives seem prepared to reject Adams for a second term for various reasons: The mayor responded to the chronic lack of affordable housing with regulatory giveaways to the real-estate industry, such as his "City of Yes" package that would loosen zoning restrictions. He has refused to back protections for low- and moderate-income tenants. He confronted the migrant influx with a haphazard series of temporary measures followed by budget cuts and yet more aggressive policing.

Adams also stacked his administration with a disproportionate number of friends and obedient cronies, some of whom are also the targets of corruption charges. This looks somewhat like the Trump regime, which has also been stacked with friends and loyalists.

To be fair, corruption has historically been a chronic element in New York City government. So it is perhaps not surprising that Adams crossed the line and flagrantly dismissed responsible criticisms of his policies from the City Council and many community, civic, civil rights and housing organizations.

POLICING & REAL ESTATE

To be more specific, the problem with both Adams and Trump has been their blind obedience to policing and real-estate development. This kind of corruption has long been embedded in New York City's economy and governance system. In addition, Adams has been overtly hostile when reacting to critics of his public and private peccadillos. But if we look carefully beyond the mayor's bluster, we can see the deeper, historical corruption of the political class that helped to lift him up from being a cop who openly exposed racism in the NYPD in the 1990s to a mayor who reinforced the impunity of the police force — choosing at the same time to ignore charges of racist policing.

The longtime faith of Eric Adams in policing parallels his service to Brooklyn's Democratic Party, one of the most powerful institutions in the city's most populous borough. In the past the party leadership traditionally centered its power on the borough president's office, which Adams ran for two terms. Borough Hall is typically where politicians learn the importance of obeisance to the party, how to sustain close ties with the real-estate industry, and what it takes to protect the more exclusive and powerful neighborhood enclaves. Borough presidents have traditionally assuaged criticism of the institutional neglect of low-income communities of color by showering them with the little bit of patronage funding these officials control.

The local press tends to underestimate the role of the Democratic Party machinery citywide, but the "Brooklyn machine" stands out for its insular power and subservience to real estate. (The Democrats rule in all boroughs except Staten Island, where conservatives tend to outnumber liberals and the Republican Party rules). But it makes no sense to simply characterize Adams' party as "liberal" or "conservative." He has sought to define himself as an independent force (if not an "independent") who is able to work in the public interest. After his election as mayor, however, he elevated the same kind of disciplined loyalty to the party apparatus that he had challenged when he fought for racial equality in the NYPD.

On the policy front, the bankruptcy of the Adams administration is nowhere more clear than in his City of Yes proposal, which would alter the city's zoning rules to open

up new opportunities for real estate investment around the city. The City of Yes loyally follows the myth of supply-side economics, which pushes the false claim that homelessness and the lack of affordable housing can be resolved by simply building more housing. It's pure supply-side nonsense, and it hasn't worked for at least the last century. Having saturated the luxury market in Manhattan and the Brooklyn and Queens waterfronts and opened up new upper-income enclaves in portions of the South Bronx, big real estate wants more. And it wants to strip tenants of legal protections.

The City of Yes, if implemented, will help advance the real-estate industry's takeover of neighborhoods across the city. It will undermine the role of community boards, community-based housing advocates and the drive for truly affordable housing — which can only be provided with more government subsidies, improved services and stronger regulation of the private market.

As many progressives, including myself, seek to reject another Adams term, I am mindful that he is only the second Black mayor to be elected in the city's entire history. The first was David Dinkins, who served only one term in the face of a racist backlash led by none other than Rudolph Giuliani, Trump's pal who used venomous rhetoric against Dinkins and spoke at an anti-Dinkins police riot outside City Hall.

Whatever we decide to do now, we must not let that history repeat itself. Fortunately, we have a wide potential field of candidates who have served in government and demonstrated a commitment to economic and racial justice.

Tom Angotti is professor emeritus at City University of New York and an adjunct professor at Parsons/The New School.

ORIGINS: Eric Adams is a product of the Brooklyn machine which stands out for its insular power and subservience to real estate.

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THE INDEPENDENT

EXILE IN THE PROMISED LAND

KAMALA’S CRUSHING DEFEAT IS A REMINDER THAT EMPTY IDENTITY POLITICS CAN’T DEFEAT TRUMP’S RIGHTWING POPULISM. SOMETHING MORE RADICAL IS NEEDED

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

“Fuck America!” Her voice shook my phone. “I’m leaving! This is Trump country; fine, let ‘em have it, I’m done.” Rage. Disgust. Hurt. The days after Trump’s re-election, my friend yelled. I said yes, leave, but most people can’t JetBlue away. We gotta fight. Besides, where would we go? Wakanda? “Wakanda?” she shot back. “It’s not even a democracy. King T’Challa? Hello?” “We won’t be either,” I huffed. “Trump forever,” she used the Black Panther accent, made the Black Panther salute. I did too. Deep belly laughter shook us. We yelled “Trump forever!” on the street. It was the first joy I felt since the election. I hung up and smiled. We will need humor to get through these next years. ICE will seize undocumented neighbors. Activists will be surveilled. Voting, in grave peril. Homophobia, legalized. Racism, celebrated.

A DREAM DEFERRED

After Trump’s victory, I threw my Kamala Harris “Yes We Kam” shirt in the trash. I was angry at her, angry at Democrats for veering so hard to the right. I felt like a pilot in a G-Force flight simulator. I was angry at myself for being duped. I did not feel rage; I felt a hollow hurt. The re-election of Donald Trump felt like the end of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “dream.” We were taught since childhood that with hard work we could integrate fully into the United States — I mean truly feel at home. Not look over our shoulders. Not fear the police. Not bite our tongues when racist jokes were told at work. Feel safe on land we bought. Not fear another crack era but see our neighborhoods thrive like everyone else’s ZIP codes. Maybe this could be the promised land. A Harris victory meant we on the left could intensify the struggle. We could fight for universal healthcare, workers’ rights and a Green New Deal. We could stop Israel’s genocide in Gaza. If our victories gathered momentum, we could transform the United States, a nation based on Native genocide and African slavery, women’s second-class citizenship and exploitation of workers, into the promised land. Or at least a real, functioning democracy. Now looking at Trump pick his cabinet, we will fight just to keep the right to vote. And fluoride in our water. And the polio vaccine. I kept the trash-can lid open and looked at the crumpled Kamala shirt. Democrats sold her as proof that MLK Jr.’s Dream was coming true — but it was the wrong King. It was the King from the Apple ad, the King of DEI and respectability politics. Not the end-the-war, end-poverty, radical 1968 King. In hindsight, she and Obama were frauds. They betrayed King’s legacy with their support for U.S. forever wars abroad and corporate centrism at home. King’s real heirs were Jesse Jackson, Sen. Bernie Sanders and The Squad. Losing the election, and maybe democracy itself, means a lot

of liberals lost an illusion. Now they are free of fake dreams. Now we can all imagine again. I closed the trash. Good riddance.

INSUFFICIENT FUNDS

Ever had your card declined? The card machine at the bodega beeps weird, and the cashier looks embarrassed: “Declined.” That’s what happened when Democrats lost. My son ran the aisles, playing hide-and-seek. I picked up a box of eggs. I pretended to weigh it in one of those double-pan scales held by Lady Justice. Eggs? Democracy? You can only pick one. Remember when prices shot up? On everything. Eggs. Milk. Meat. Date nights. Rent. Gas. Every. Fucking. Thing. Add to that, now you tipped everything. Fifteen percent. Twenty percent. Twenty-five percent. I saw on my neighbors a pinched anger. We have watched the “American dream” become more and more expensive for decades. Imagine being on an escalator from MLK Jr.’s Dream to the American Dream and it jarred to a halt. The first time I felt it stop was when Bill Fucking Clinton signed NAFTA. I remember him smiling on TV; he hailed it as a win-win for big business *and* workers. So U.S. factories closed, re-opening in Mexico and China. When I visited friends in the Rust Belt, I saw jobless people and neighborhoods cratered like the moon. Once Democrats took that turn, they never looked back. Democrats gave up the working-class for “Atari” voters, a high income, tech-based middle class. In a perverse dynamic, the more Democrats gave up on the working class, the more they championed racial diversity and gay rights. King’s dream became a moral savings account they withdraw from when they came up short on real change. Yes, Obama too. He styled himself the “Joshua generation” in Bible talk — those after Moses who got to the promised land. Guess what he did? In 2008 Wall Street crashed the global economy. Brother man bailed out bankers but not the 10 million people who lost homes. Black wealth in the United States was decimated under the first Black president. After Trump, President Biden renewed our industrial base, but his crown jewel Build Back Better was blocked by two Democratic senators. Broken promise after broken promise after broken promise. I shook my head. We got legal weed. We got Obamacare. We got gay marriage. The United States pulled out of Afghanistan. All good. All good. But no universal healthcare or Green New Deal. No free college or trade-skill training. No stopping Wall Street from buying homes and inflating costs; no Robin Hood Tax on Wall Street trading. No end to the genocide in Gaza. None of that. What we did achieve is overwhelmed by what we constantly lose. We are left with next to nothing. We can’t eat nothing. Nothing ain’t gonna pay our rent. But we have Martin Luther King Jr. Day and now Juneteenth! I got to the cashier. My son held the eggs up to me. I almost forgot. I put them next to the sausages and



milk, gave Mohamed my debit card. I waited. I waited longer. Finally, I heard it beep.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE

“What are you two dressed for?” asked the super of my building, a friend I’ve know for years. “We’re going to vote.” My kid tugged at my hand to hurry up. “Wanna come?” “Sure.” He came with us and stood in line. Later, he came from behind the voting blind and asked who to vote for. Trump? Harris? He didn’t follow politics. “Harris,” I whispered. He gave me a wink and went back behind the blind. On the way back, an eerie feeling sank in my belly. The street was lukewarm. It was not like Obama’s first election when joyful lines circled the block. Or in 2020 when, to stop Trump, lines again circled the block. Talk was loud. Laughter, too. Not in 2024. The air felt flat. The day was muted, as if passion had been rinsed by the grey clouds. I think back on Election Day. The vibe was reflected by the data. In the United States there are 244 million citizens who can vote, but in 2024, only 155 million did, 77 million for Trump, 75 million for Harris and three million for others. Basically two million voters decided the election. Yet they are vastly outweighed by the 94 million who did not so much as sneeze near a polling place. Elections are an empty ritual. Under the media hysteria over the “swing voters” is an Everest-sized mountain of invisible people, staring at the election like the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. Who are the non-voters? Many of that 94 million are part of the 144 million poor and working-class. I was seized by a fever: I had to know if the people I knew — who I shared the stoop with, who I shared the bodega with, who I shared the park with — did they vote? Many did not. A lot never did. My boy with the pit bulls? He didn’t vote. What’s the point? My super? Just that once. Section 8 crew, bobbing heads to Kool & The Gang on a portable speaker? Nope, they didn’t vote. The Honduran lady selling lunches to the Mexican day workers? Nope. And yes, she’s a citizen. Goddamn I was pissed. Steam shot from my ears like a cartoon. Didn’t they know that they were going to pay for Trump’s victory? The Republicans will cut Medicare, Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act, food stamps, Social Security, rental assistance for the poor, funding for environmental protection. “They are coming for us,” I thought. “Republicans are going at the budget like a blind barber with scissors. Why don’t you care?” I drove to school, parked and hurried to class, where my students looked terrified. I asked them how they felt about Trump’s victory. A young woman, arms crossed over her chest, bit her lip for a minute. “I’m scared about my right to choose,” she said. Her eyebrows knotted. “Already I hear guys joking, ‘Your body; my choice,’ and it’s scary.” The classroom filled like a pressurized can. Another student raised his hand: “I’m gay. I’m scared that my boyfriend — he lives in Texas — is he going to get hurt. Am I?” His voice shook. “Am I going to get beaten up in the street?” His last words echoed. The air was thick and unbreathable. I thought about the Black men and women in my neighborhood who didn’t vote. I gritted my teeth. The price of eggs didn’t matter. The ability to buy a house didn’t matter. They should have voted to protect these kids right here, right in front of me. “Look, I can’t follow you home,” I said. “That would be weird.” “Yes,” he bobbed his head. “Well, maybe.” The class giggled. “If you feel unsafe,” I said. “Let me know, and I’ll walk you to your car. While you’re on campus, you don’t have to learn in fear.”

When the class ended, I put the folders in my bag. He came up to me. “Professor?” He said. “Thank you.”

THE NEW PROMISED LAND

“I just want to do God’s will,” MLK Jr. boomed his final vision. “And he’s allowed me to look over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land!” I paused the YouTube clip. I went to a different tab. And played it. “I want you to take a look around you and find someone you don’t know,” Sen. Bernie Sanders voice echoed from the microphone. “Maybe someone who doesn’t look like you. Are you willing to fight for that person as much as you’re willing to fight for yourself?” The crowd roared yes. The camera panned the faces, brown and pale, wearing a hijab, wearing braids and door-knocker earrings. The beauty of New York shone. King and Bernie were like ocean waves that lifted the heart. They shared the spirit of radical love that came from embracing a deep truth: We are all human, flawed and messy but wanting to be whole. And we can’t be whole human beings unless we are in communion with others. A lot of us, especially now, fetishize our differences, make them identities, sometimes even a career. The worst form of identity politics is when we commodify our trauma. We lose touch with reality. The poor and the marginalized are in a constant state of emergency. I know parents burying children from gang shootings. I’ve reported from flooded cities where families shivered in the night, homeless and terrified, their eyes like flashlights searching for something, someone to hold on to. I know, just like you know, that as the earth gets hotter and more homes are destroyed, more families like them ask for help. I shut the laptop and caught the bus to my son’s school. On the way I felt there had to be a way — a way to reignite that spirit. It’s the only path forward. It isn’t through liberalism, not the upward climb into the meritocratic elite that disguises a whole architecture of class privilege. It isn’t through militant violence that alienates the masses and invites the state to send in troops. No, no, no; none of those work now. When I got to the school, I waited in the office and saw the child-drawn portrait of King. It looked like a multi-million-dollar Picasso. King was in bright colors and odd angles and a little distorted. An idea seen through the eyes of a child. Pure. We need love to make visible how we are already connected. What did King say? I Googled it on my phone: “In a real sense, all life is inter-related. All men are caught in inescapable of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” “Daddy!” My kid ran to me. I lifted him up and kissed him. In seconds like a giant faucet loosened, kids poured down the stairs laughing, pushing, yelling, showing each other toys. One of them had drawn in crayon this portrait of King. In a way they were all going to have to re-create his dream. Make it real again. I kissed my son again. We can start now.



PLAYING WITH

TRUMP 2.0 APPROACHING, SOME REPUBLICAN LEADERS ARE LOOKING FOR WAYS TO SLASH SOCIAL SECURITY

BY ERIC LAURSEN

In a matter of weeks, the Republican Party will control the presidency and both houses of Congress (not to mention the Supreme Court). Arguably, the last time the party of the right felt this confident about its grip on government was in 2004, when George W. Bush was reelected following his alleged military triumph in Iraq, and the GOP held on to leadership on Capitol Hill.

Incoming Senate majority leader John Thune (R-S.D.) is saying publicly that if the United States is to reduce its ballooning national debt, Congress will have to look at “solutions” that make “these programs sustainable.” GOP code for cutting benefits under Social Security and Medicare. Early this month, Elon Musk, one of Trump’s closest advisors, raised alarms when he amplified a thread on Twitter in which Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) branded Social Security as “a classic bait-and-switch,” “an outdated, mismanaged system,” and lamented that the payroll taxes that fund it hadn’t simply gone into private investment accounts. Vivek Ramaswamy, Musk’s fellow billionaire and his co-chair of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), the grandly named think-tank the two set up to find ways to slash the federal government, has also mused about breaking up Social Security and turning it into private investments.

Trump himself, in a book he wrote in 2000, slammed Social Security as a Ponzi scheme and enthused “privatization would be good for all of us.” Since then he’s been cagier, and he defeated his Republican primary challengers in 2016 in part by telling them they were crazy for wanting to mess with such a popular program. The only concrete proposal he made on the campaign trail this year regarding Social Security was to eliminate the taxes that retirees pay on their benefits, a change that would mostly help more affluent households and that would weaken the program’s finances.

But as with so many other matters, he left himself some wiggle room.

“Under no circumstances should Republicans vote to cut a single penny from Medicare or Social Security,” he said in a campaign video that was still posted to his website this month. But then he continued, “to pay for Joe Biden’s reckless spending spree.”

L I F E L I N E

That leaves tens of millions of workers and their survivors, retirees, and the disabled sitting on a knife edge, waiting to see what the mercurial incoming president and his grab bag of right-wing advisors opt to do with the most successful social-equity and poverty-reduction program in U.S. history.

It’s nearly impossible to overstate how vital Social Security is to working people in the United States. As of last year, some 183 million active workers were paying payroll taxes into the system, according to the Social Security trustees. The combined Social Security and Disability Insurance programs paid benefits to 53 million retired workers and their dependents, six million survivors of deceased workers, and nine million disabled workers and their dependents.

Social Security used to be part of what retirement experts called the “three-legged stool” of old-age provision in the United States, along with personal savings and employer-sponsored pensions. Not so much today. Pensions, except in the public sector, are disappearing, replaced — if they are replaced — by 401(k) savings plans that are invested in stocks and other securities, rising and falling with the markets.

As the costs of housing, healthcare and education have continued to swell, personal savings are disappearing too. Almost 40 million working-age households — 45% of the total — have no dedicated retirement account, and 62% of working households aged 55–64 have saved less than the equivalent of one year’s income: not even remotely what they would need to maintain their living standard after they retire.

According to some estimates, Social Security replaces much less of people’s working income today than it did in 1983, which was the last time the program was significantly revamped. Nevertheless, retirees today are more dependent on it than they were then because of the shifts in the economy that have made it harder for them to save or earn pension benefits on their own.

None of this is very persuasive to the right, which has branded Social Security as socialism and a misuse of money from the time it became law during the New Deal. But assaulting it frontally has never been very popular. Republican politicians have been more successful when they attack it obliquely, professing they support it and only want to make sure it remains fiscally solid.

Social Security has built up a large trust fund over the years, but by 2035, the trustees forecast the trust fund will be tapped out; the only funds avail-

GARY MARTIN

PEOPLE'S LIVES

able will be the payroll taxes coming in each year, which will cover just 83% of projected benefits. By law, benefits will have to be cut back unless Congress devises a way to make up the shortfall. Given the economic realities U.S. workers face — and the popularity of the program — that wouldn't be acceptable. But this also creates possibilities for Social Security's enemies.

Raising payroll taxes to reduce the funding deficit is out. Republicans don't raise taxes. Instead, for decades, they have argued for tweaking the formula used to determine benefit payments to make them less generous, particularly for upper-income workers, while leaving them intact for current retirees and those nearing retirement age. That, theoretically, will give younger workers time to catch up by saving more. This is essentially what the House Republican Study Committee is calling for in its 2025 budget proposal.

There are three serious problems with this, critics point out. First, immunizing current retirees and older workers from benefit cuts would mean deeper cuts for late retirees (the Baby-Boomer age group now leaving the workforce is the largest in the nation's history). Second, those later retirees are likely to be more dependent on Social Security, not less. Third, and once again, the public would punish anyone who tried to force through the cuts.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

How to get around these problems? The answer, Republican congressional leaders have known for years, is to peel off some centrist Democrats who accept their arguments, and persuade them to “walk off the cliff together.” With the fingerprints of both parties on a Social Security “rescue” plan, no individual lawmaker would have to pay the price. Congress could pass a law setting up a bipartisan commission that would craft a Social Security “reform” proposal and require in the law that Congress “fast track” a vote on that proposal with minimal discussion and debate. In its budget proposal, this is what the Republican Study Committee signals it would like to see happen.

Nancy Altman, president of Social Security Works, a Washington advocacy group, has been studying and working on program issues for decades. “A vote for a fast-track commission is a vote to cut Social Security,” she says.

Slashing benefits for upper-income workers, Altman points out, would make the program more welfare-like and undermine the cross-class social solidarity it was meant to foster. It wouldn't go very far toward improving the funding picture; deeper cuts for less affluent households would still be needed.

Social Security Works and other advocacy groups, many of which are aligned with the labor movement, have made some progress “immunizing” congressional Democrats against the fast-track commission idea, Altman says, but some centrists, like Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.) and Sen. Angus King (I-Maine), who caucuses with the Democrats, have refused to rule it out.

Altman doesn't expect any such proposal to come up in the second Trump administration's early weeks or possibly months. Trump himself wants to sign an immigration-restriction bill right away, and the Republican leadership is laser-focused

on extending and expanding their regressive 2017 tax cuts. The only way to do the latter is to make sure the measure doesn't have to go through the reconciliation procedure, which would enable the Democrats to kill it. But if Social Security were part of the package, reconciliation would be unavoidable.

If Thune, House Speaker Mark Johnson (R-La.) and their troops can get their priority items passed quickly, however, they may decide the time is ripe to address Social Security, and Trump may just be in the mood to let them try. In that case, their attention will turn to their Democratic colleagues.

“A lot will depend on the message they took from the election,” Altman observes. If the Democrats are feeling cautious, enough may go along with the fast-track commission to push it through. If not, a more optimistic scenario might be realistic.

For years progressive Democrats, notably Bernie Sanders and Rep. John Larson (D-CT), have been pushing their own ideas for fixing Social Security's funding problems while expanding the program to better meet the needs of today's hard-pressed workers. Larson's latest version of his bill, Social Security 2100: A Sacred Trust, would raise benefits by 2% across the board for all beneficiaries, along with other improvements, such as caregiver tax credits for people taking time out to care for children or other dependents. It would raise payroll taxes slightly overall and for the first time apply the tax to personal income above \$400,000 a year. The net result would be to cut the system's funding gap in half over the next 75 years.

Another bill, introduced in 2022 by Bernie Sanders and Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.), would improve benefits while applying payroll tax to all income over \$250,000, including capital gains. That would address Social Security's two great underlying problems. Wage growth has stagnated in the United States since the early 1980s, which is why payroll taxes produce less revenue than they used to. This is partly because of the collapse of good-paying jobs for the working class but also because wealthy Americans get more of their income from investments — capital gains — than previously. Sanders and DeFazio's bill would correct much of this imbalance.

Both bills have attracted a healthy group of cosponsors. Yet the Democratic leadership has thus far been reluctant to introduce any such proposals. When Nancy Pelosi was speaker, she balked, not wanting to be seen as supporting a tax increase.

The best outcome, Altman argues, would be for the Democrats to hold the line against any Republican initiative this year, with progressives calling out waverers in their ranks. Then, if the Democrats retake the House in 2026, they could move on a version of the Larson bill, daring the Republicans to vote against it. If it passed it would be unlikely to prevail in the Senate, but nevertheless could change the political dynamic.

“It would put such a squeeze on the Republicans. It would be amazing,” Altman says.

What are the chances? Reportedly, Larson is close to Hakeem Jeffries (D-N.Y.), Pelosi's successor as speaker, and has spoken with him about Social Security 2100.

A tantalizing prospect. But first the Democrats would have to stand firm.



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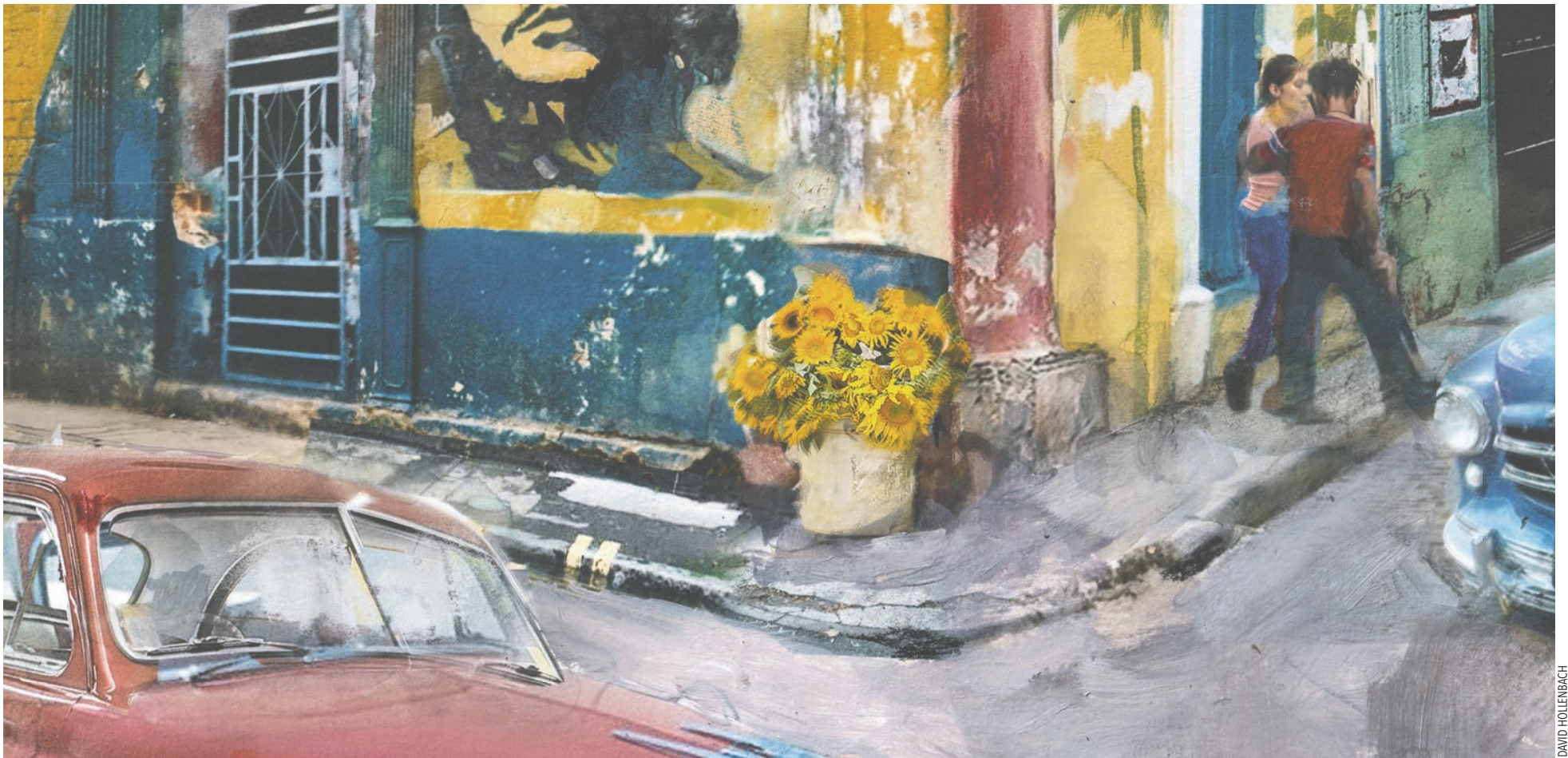
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CUBA IN THE DARK

BIDEN URGED TO EASE CUBA SANCTIONS BEFORE HE LEAVES OFFICE



DAVID HOLLENBACH

BY DANNY VALDES

In every town, city and village in Cuba, the blackouts have become unavoidable. Hospitals rely on backup power just to keep life-saving machines running. Families scramble to keep food fresh, save up for propane stoves, and stretch limited budgets for essentials that can survive without refrigeration. Cuba's power infrastructure is in a state of dire deterioration. Nearly 95% of the island's thermal power plants are more than 40 years old, many nearing the half-century mark. The Ministry of Energy and Mines reports that these plants, which still carry the Soviet blueprint of a bygone era, are well beyond their intended lifespan, struggling to meet the needs of an entire nation.

For most Cubans, these blackouts aren't just a power issue; they reshape the very rhythm of daily life. Entire communities have learned to bend to the demands of an aging and crumbling energy grid, one that they themselves cannot fix, modernize or even maintain without external support — support that the U.S. blockade prevents them from accessing.

CUBA'S ENERGY CRISIS & U.S. SANCTIONS

The sanctions imposed during the Trump Administration, largely maintained by the Biden Administration, have severely restricted Cuba's ability to import the technology and resources needed to modernize or replace its aging infrastructure. The U.S. blockade doesn't only limit trade with the United States; it also has a global chilling effect, as the threat of U.S. sanctions deters countries and companies around the world from trading with Cuba. This impact is most visible during the annual U.N. General Assembly vote on a resolution to condemn and end the embargo. For 33 consecutive years, the world has overwhelmingly called for the blockade to end, with 187 countries voting in favor of the resolution and only the United States and Israel isolated in opposition.

This chilling effect extends to critical sectors like energy. Even countries sympathetic to Cuba hesitate to sell the fuel and infrastructure needed to maintain and upgrade its energy grid. Cuba's outdated thermal plants, reliant on dwindling resources, struggle to keep the grid running in a country with abundant potential for renew-

able energy. Transformative solar, wind and hydro projects remain out of reach due to blocked financing and restricted access to suppliers. As a result, Cubans face unreliable power and rising pollution from an overburdened system barely holding itself together.

DIVIDED

This year's presidential election saw Florida shift 10 points further to the right. Miami-Dade County followed suit despite Biden's extensive "anti-regime" overtures to the exile community. The results raise a critical question: Will this free Democrats from the perceived electoral necessity of pandering to South Florida Cubans, or was "electoral necessity" merely a convenient excuse for Washington policymakers who already want Cuba to fail?

The hope lies with the younger, more progressive wing of the Democratic Party, which could help reshape the narrative around Cuba. Outgoing Progressive Caucus Chair Pramila Jayapal and Congresswoman Ilhan Omar visited Cuba last year, signaling a willingness to challenge the status quo. Additionally, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined other legislators in signing a recent congressional letter urging Biden to provide humanitarian aid to Cuba and remove its designation as a "State Sponsor of Terrorism."

The SSOT designation has devastating consequences for Cuba. It severely restricts access to international financial systems, discourages foreign investment and complicates humanitarian efforts. The label makes it nearly impossible for Cuba to secure loans or trade agreements with global partners, further exacerbating the island's economic crisis. Removing this designation would be a critical step toward alleviating Cuba's humanitarian challenges and building a foundation for improved relations. The progressive push within the Democratic Party offers a glimmer of hope for meaningful change.

Members of the Cuba solidarity movement are scrambling to pressure the Biden administration to remove this spurious designation for Cuba before the incoming Trump administration further entrenches it to devastating effect. Recently, a coalition of over 50 elected officials, labor unions like the United Auto Workers, and solidarity organizations from across the country sent its own letter demanding action from Biden before it's too late.

DEMOCRATS

A CALL FOR SOLIDARITY

As the escalating events in the Middle East grab international attention, it's natural to focus on the most immediate crises. But Cuba, a neighbor to the United States, is enduring a crisis of its own, with people who live in conditions no less deserving of our attention. Ending the blockade is the first step toward empowering Cuban society to recover. The blockade is outdated, punitive and ultimately counterproductive — it isolates Cuba from solutions that would bring relief to millions of people.

In moments like these, solidarity isn't just a word. It's a recognition that the right to a stable, dignified life transcends political borders. Lifting the blockade is about giving the Cuban people the chance to build a future, to harness their own strengths without an external hand holding them back. It's time to see the crisis in Cuba for what it is: an urgent need for change that will allow the Cuban people to live without the constant shadow of blackouts and to rebuild their society with dignity and resilience.

Danny Valdes is the co-chair of the Democratic Socialists of America's Cuba Solidarity Working Group. He is a first-generation Cuban American who grew up in South Florida and lives in New York City. To get involved in DSA's #SendAndEnd campaign, demanding Biden to send humanitarian aid and end Cuba's designation on the State Sponsors of Terror List: dsaic.org/forcuba.

PETROSTATE STALEMATE

AN INSIDE LOOK AT THIS YEAR'S ANNUAL U.N. CLIMATE CONFERENCE HELD IN OIL-RICH AZERBAIJAN



RENÉE FELTZ

BY RENÉE FELTZ

BAKU, Azerbaijan — The same week Donald Trump won his second U.S. presidential election backed by billionaire climate deniers and vowing to “drill, baby, drill,” the 29th United Nations Climate Conference (COP29) kicked off across the world in the petrostate of Azerbaijan. Skepticism ran high.

Average global temperatures have continued to march upward regardless of who occupies the White House, and climate activists noted how after the United Arab Emirates hosted COP28 in 2023, led by the head of the country’s state oil company, the resulting deal was “full of loopholes for the fossil fuel industry” instead of clear plans for setting global emissions targets.

Not to be outdone, the number of oil and gas lobbyists attending COP29 exceeded that of any other delegation. Azerbaijan’s President Ilham Heydar was vice president of his country’s state oil company for nearly 20 years until he took over from his father as the country’s autocratic leader in 2003. Fossil fuels now account for 90% of exports and 60% of government revenue. In what climate scientists called a “sick joke,” Azerbaijan recently announced plans to raise gas production by a third.

Like COP28 and COP27 before it in Egypt, there was pressure from human-rights groups for the host country to release political prisoners. Some boycotted COP29 altogether due to Heydar’s crackdown on environmental activists and critics and Azerbaijan’s 2023 military occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region that forced out 100,000 Armenian inhabitants after 30 years of separatist rule.

Those who attended the summit in the capital city of Baku along the Caspian Sea came on government visas with strict conditions. Most stayed in the tourist zone and rode shuttle buses to the sprawling COP29 conference center erected in the parking lot of a massive soccer stadium. Unlike past years, flags from UN member nations did not line the entrance. Once inside, long corridors stretched out from a central hub in different directions to Zones A, B, C, D and E, each with its own meeting rooms behind security guards. One room was named for Nagorno-Karabakh, which Armenians call the Republic of Artsakh.

“MANY PEOPLE FEEL THESE COP NEGOTIATIONS are increasingly disconnected from reality,” said Akram Al-Khalili, a protester from the Palestinian delegation. Midway through the two-week conference, he joined hundreds in a demonstration where participants were limited to humming and clapping while holding up banners for an allotted time and then left in groups for security reasons.

With so much at stake, activists and NGOs combined their strength as civil society to navigate restrictions and organize a constant series of events and actions to push delegates to negotiate a deal in which long-polluting rich countries would finance mitigation and adaptation to the climate crisis — seen in a historical perspective as “climate debt” — and everyone agreed to limit carbon emissions to keep global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial temperatures.

Frontline nations and indigenous community leaders scarred by climate disasters spoke with great urgency about avoiding ineffective solutions like carbon capture and nuclear energy.

“A lot of people died,” said Carolina Santos, a climate activist from Brazil, when recalling the impact of global warming-fueled heavy rainfall that led to floods in the southern part of her country in 2023. “A lot of people lost their houses, everything they had, especially poor people, and they’re still recovering.”

Spain’s Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez called for “drastic measures” after global warming-fueled heavy rainfall led to floods that killed hundreds in his country in late October, saying, “We need to undergo decarbonization, adapt our towns and infrastructure.”

Colombia’s Environment Minister and COP29 Delegation Chair Susana Muhamad discussed her country’s plan to phase out fossil fuels despite being a major exporter of coal as well as its suspension of coal exports to Israel. “We are calling other countries to not supply ... fossil fuel energy that is used in genocide,” Muhamad, who is of Palestinian heritage, told *Democracy Now!*

“The same fossil fuel companies that profit from the destruction of the environment are also profiting from the genocide being committed against the people of Palestine,” noted Al-Khalili.

On the final official day of the conference, activists held out hope for a good deal. “If we don’t seize this opportunity, Baku will be remembered as a place we failed to rise to the occasion,” said Mohamed Adow of Kenya, who has been participating in COPs since he founded PowerShift Africa in

2018 to shift energy policies to zero carbon. “This is the worst COP in recent memory,” he later concluded.

COP29 ended with a “bad deal” in which wealthy countries — including the United States, the biggest historic polluter — rejected a \$1 trillion proposal from developing countries facing the greatest impacts of climate change. They instead agreed to a \$300 billion climate finance deal that activists called “a drop in the ocean compared to what is needed.”

“For two weeks, rich, developed countries didn’t put a figure on the table until the final day. That meant there was very, very little opportunity to be able to interrogate that figure or to find out more detail,” Asad Rehman, executive director of War on Want and lead spokesperson for the Climate Justice Coalition, told *Democracy Now!*

“Now with Brazil coming up,” Rehman continued, “there is an opportunity, not only because of the Lula presidency, which has said that it’s committed to tackling climate, but that also we as civil society have social movements in Brazil. And of course we’re able to exert pressure both on the outside and on the inside.”

Trump says he will again withdraw the United States from the legally binding international treaty called the Paris Agreement that underlies the COP talks. Thus Americans working in a federal capacity are unlikely to attend COP30 in Belem, Brazil, near the mouth of the Amazon River. For the first time in several years, the city will also host a People’s Summit similar to counter-conferences organized at past COPs.

“I appeal to governments to see this agreement as a foundation — and build on it,” said U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres as COP29 wrapped up. He commended “all the delegates, young people, and civil society representatives who came to Baku to push parties for maximum ambition and justice.”

Guterres urged countries to deliver new economy-wide national climate action plans aligned with the 1.5°C goal well ahead of COP30 and demanded that “the biggest emitters must lead.”

TURNING UP THE HEAT: Climate activists press their demands at the COP29 conference in Baku, Azerbaijan.



THE NETWORK OF REFUGEES

A PATCHWORK OF MUTUAL AID ORGANIZATIONS HAS SPRUNG UP TO TACKLE THE SEVERE PROBLEMS FACING PEOPLE FLEEING GENOCIDE

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

From November 2023 to May 2024, at least 100,000 people fleeing the Gaza genocide entered Egypt through the Rafah border crossing.

Citing financial and security concerns, the Egyptian government offers no more than a 45-day visitor stay to these Palestinians and some medical evacuation services. It does not allow them to work, go to public school or benefit from its food stipend programs. Nor does it provide them with refugee status.

The restrictions on Palestinian refugees imposed by Egypt leave people, already suffering from the severe trauma of the genocide, more likely to become isolated from society.

"I want to be able to help people have opportunity. I don't want them to sit in an apartment and not be able to work or go to school," says Selim,* a Moroccan-American living in Cairo. In April he and Nour,* an Egyptian acquaintance living in New York City, launched a group that connects recent Gazan refugees to resources that help them survive in Cairo. "These people need a life, but unfortunately we're just helping them with the bare minimum," he said.

Selim and Nour's is one in a network of over a dozen ad-hoc groups made up of around 100 volunteers that began popping up since November to fill the gap left by the Egyptian government.

All the volunteers in the aid network who were interviewed for this article said they have hundreds, sometimes thousands of messages in their inboxes, mostly from Gazans seeking assistance who they don't have the funds to help. On top of that, some aid groups are beginning to struggle to maintain the regular influx of donations they've been receiving for months.

"Sometimes we are able to secure money for rent, but then sometimes people don't have any more money to give," said Samia, a journalist who fled her home in Rafah in April and has received help from some of the groups. "I just want to work again. I'm tired of having to keep asking people for money."

Despite their general lack of financial stability in Cairo, many Gazans, like Samia, still send money home. "Whatever we have extra, we send to people in Gaza. They need it more than we do."

BEFORE ISRAEL'S MAY 6 INVASION of Rafah and seizure of the Gaza-Egypt border crossing, Palestinians could leave Gaza in one of four ways. Non-medical refugees could either go through the lengthy, laborious and unsure method of directly requesting Egyptian authorities to leave or, more commonly, by paying \$5,000 or more to a company with military ties called Hala that monopolized "coordinated" evacuations in January.

There were also around 4,800 medical evacuations. All evacuations had to be approved or denied by Israel's Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT). NGOs and ambulance services would bring people across the Rafah Border Crossing into Egypt, and sometimes people would be evacuated to other countries from there. As we go to press, only 329 patients have been medically evacuated out of Gaza since May 7, and nobody else except for the occasional foreign health worker has been permitted to leave the Strip.

UNDERGROUND WORK HELPING GAZAN ES SURVIVE IN EGYPT

IN LATE WINTER a loose network of volunteers in Cairo started to emerge. They would make hospital visits, find out what kinds of things Palestinians needed, and fundraise to accrue money and resources to donate to them. The word spread, and others volunteered to get involved, some gaining larger followings on social media or within personal networks so that they could rake in as many donations as possible.

The need for these volunteers is increased by the fact that in recent years Egypt has threatened the existence of NGOs. Per a 2019 law, “the authorities are forcing organizations to choose between operating under conditions that make independent work impossible or outright closure,” said Adam Coogle of Human Rights Watch in a 2023 statement. Almost none of the aid groups have any legal status, forcing them to operate as quietly as they can.

Cairo is one of the most international cities in the Middle East and North Africa, and many of the people who became involved in the network were foreigners, often of Arab descent.

Before the war on Gaza, there was already a large community of Palestinians living in Cairo, a sprawling city of 22.6 million people. But they have created businesses and community in a part of western Cairo called 6th of October City, which by public transit is more than two hours away from Nasr City, in eastern Cairo — where many refugees from Gaza have landed — and also far from the downtown Cairo slums that some recently-arrived Gazans are living in.

Most Gazans who arrived in Egypt had spent all their money fleeing the genocide and lacked almost everything. “We came here with nothing,” says Souha, Samia’s cousin, who crossed the border with her. “When you go to Egypt we could only bring a small bag; that’s all they allow.” They also mostly only have Gazan identity documents issued by Israel, not passports.

The bulk of the assistance the aid networks provide goes to basic necessities like rent, food and medical fees. Groups also help pay for school fees, furnish peoples’ apartments or help them look for work, usually remote. There are groups doing résumé-writing workshops, starting roving art therapy programs, setting up mental-health-aware learning environments, taking refugees on group outings or just spending time with people and listening to their stories.

“I did farm days, pool days, horseback riding; I get the mothers massages so they can experience wellness and some joy and care,” said Julie,* a German who has lived in Cairo on and off since 2007. She sponsors around 10 families, providing them each €200–500 per month for time periods between six months and one year.

“After a farm day a dad said he hadn’t seen his child like that since October [2023],” Julie said.

Selim and Nour sponsor around 15 families’ rent per month and work on dozens of other ad-hoc cases, collecting roughly \$5,000 per month total from 300 donors they have in a group chat that Nour manages.

Maya,* a volunteer from California who moved to Egypt to do this work six months ago, manages the cases of 35 families outside of hospitals and has connections with over 150 families in hospitals. “I’ve been giving my number out at hospitals since I arrived,” she said, “so they will text and ask for medications, toiletries, cash aid, etc.” Maya describes the work they’re doing as just a “drop in the bucket.”

“We should have a level of infrastructure; it shouldn’t just be this grassroots volunteer network,” she said. “We’re all doing the best we can with the resources we have, but fundamentally Palestinians deserve so much more than this.”

All the aid-work volunteers we spoke with are currently at capacity for how many people they can help per month. Selim and Nour, though, say they always try and have some extra money on the side for the most extreme situations. For example, when a woman wasn’t able to pay the 3,000 Egyptian pounds (\$62) in rent at her apartment, her landlord came in and “beat her and her children and threw them on the streets,” Selim said. “Another group stepped in and we were able to find her another apartment for 4,500 EGP (\$93), but we’re not able to sustain continuous emergency responses.”

While there have been reports of some landlords offering cheaper rents because they know the incredible hardship the Gazans are facing, everyone I spoke to for this piece told me that most are jacking up prices for Gazan tenants.

“To get an apartment [that’s not in the slums] it’s \$300–500,” says Samia. “When they know that you are Palestinian, they ask you for a very high rent for the apartment.”

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION IN EGYPT doesn’t make things easier. The Egyptian pound devalued from 17:1 USD to 49:1 since the start of COVID-19. The pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war and domestic economic challenges, including high annual inflation rates, all hurt the economy. People in the country are foregoing many of life’s enjoyments, struggling to pay rent, becoming gaunt due to strict budgeting and suffering from medicine shortages in the pharmacies.

“The poverty in Egypt is greater than it was in Palestine before the genocide,” says Crystal,* a New Yorker who runs a non-profit that works with Palestinians in different parts of Palestine and Egypt. “On an individual level, I think there are a lot of Egyptians that would like to do more [for the Gazans]. “But on the business aspect ... we’ve had nothing but horrible experiences where they’re just trying to take advantage of the Palestinians.”

The situation in the public hospitals is dire. There is the medicine shortage; the hospitals are in very poor condition; hospital staffers are paid very little, as are health providers. “In one hospital, only one side of the hospital is functioning, and they sent all the Palestinians to the other side. There is no running water there,” Crystal said.

Kirsty says she knows at least 60 patients who left the hospital system because of the conditions and lack of care. “They feel like they were brought out of Gaza to another country to die,” she says. “Some of them described it as a prisoner-of-war camp.”

Some Egyptians are working to support the Gazan refugees, though. “There are a lot of everyday Egyptians who are helping, and there’s no way to quantify that support: a kind landlord; a kind neighbor,” says Nour.

For example, Julie knows a dentist that will do pro-bono work for Palestinians. And for every foreign volunteer, there are multiple Egyptians that are supporting them in effectively get things done in the country — translating, bargaining, helping them find apartments and more.

“I have had very positive interactions with Egyptians. I know of Egyptian initiatives that started since the beginning of the genocide,” says Nadia, a recent Gazan refugee herself who has been doing volunteer case work with Kirsty’s organization. “Some of my Egyptian friends offer Palestinians help, support, cash. There are groups that support people with food, housing, treatment and surgeries.”

Finding a job is hard for Egyptians, and even more so for the Palestinian refugees. Most don’t work because they’re afraid to do so without a permit and because the combined high transportation costs and extremely low wages (a cleaner on average makes 3,000 EGP per month) make it financially not worth it. We have received reports of people working online jobs for foreign companies, working in warehouses, as carpenters and in restaurants — especially if they’re Gazan- or Palestinian-owned.

WITHOUT MAJOR SYSTEMS IN PLACE to address the needs of the Palestinian refugees, “a humanitarian crisis is happening in Egypt,” says Nour. “Once they get across the border, it’s like, no — [the situation] is not fine.”

Based on the numbers of volunteer caseworkers and the families they are reaching compared to the over 100,000 Gazan refugees in Cairo, it’s likely that most of them haven’t had contact with the aid network.

“Those who were already poor, the most marginalized in these situations, always become poorer, more marginalized,” says Selim. “You need to be using social media, know how to read or write, understand that there are mutual-aid groups in order to get in touch with us. We see a lot of elderly families that are here without their kids, and they know very little; they don’t even have phones here. There’s definitely a lot of people that fall through the cracks. They know there’s foreigners and organizations, but they don’t know how to access them, and so many of us are at capacity.”

The volunteers are still making real impacts on Gazans’ lives.

“An 11-year-old little girl was pulled from the rubble of her house, and her skull was fractured so much that a piece of it was missing,” Crystal said about a Gazan evacuee, “so we found a surgeon at a private hospital in Egypt where they made a surgical implant to put into her skull,” and the girl has fully recovered.

Julie’s first case was with two little boys orphaned by Israeli soldiers, brothers Adam, 8, and Faisal, 5 — who became known worldwide when Gazan journalist Bisan Owda published a video interview with Faisal where he talks about how his pregnant mother was shot dead in front of him by the soldiers who had invaded their home in Gaza.

“Faisal would always drop some knowledge even though he’s five. All there was to drink was Coke in the hospital, so I got one, and he was like, ‘This is a boycott product,’” says Julie, who also emphasized that “they are still children. They collect little flowers and bring them to you. The whole picture of these little terrorist kids couldn’t be further from the truth.”

The volunteers are highly dedicated: In addition to maintaining regular jobs, they spend hours each day doing their case work; some have abandoned their personal lives.

On top of working a poorly-paid job in Cairo she was finally able to recently find, Nadia does case work with Kirsty for Palestinians in Gaza and with people back home in Gaza. “I sleep about two hours a night,” she said.

The primary challenge the volunteer networks are facing now, though, is the sustainability of funding.

“I’m making people go insane by reposting the GoFundMe until they give,” says Nour.

While fundraising can be sporadic — sometimes one large donor provides enough money for a case worker to assist all the families on their list for a few months — across the board people have either stopped giving money, or they are giving less, directly hindering the number of people the volunteers can support.

The Gazans we spoke with for this article don’t want the aid network to need to stay afloat; they want to go home.

“We are going to return to Gaza,” says Samia, who initially thought she was only going to go to Egypt to get treatment for severe trauma as a result of what she saw in the genocide. But soon after she arrived, her town, Rafah, was invaded, and Israel closed the border crossing. “When the war ends we are going to return. When the war ends there will be a solution for us.”

**This volunteer asked to use a pseudonym for fear of reprisal from authorities. Others have asked to be identified by their first name only for the same reason.*

This article originally appeared in The Nation.

GENOCIDE SURVIVORS: *Displaced Palestinians last May in Rafah, the Gazan border city across from Egypt.*

HOW ECONOMIC POWER IN THE WORLD WORKS

The Economic Government of the World, 1933–2023

BY MARTIN DAUNTON

FARRAR, STRAUS & GIROUX; 2023, 1024 PAGES

By Bennett Baumer

The 1999 “Battle of Seattle” brought the issue of accelerating global economic inequality into public consciousness, as more than 40,000 protesters blocked access to a World Trade Organization (WTO) conference, and trade representatives went home without making any agreements. Leftwing activists named the villains of globalization: the WTO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the various multinational corporations that were driving the new “neoliberal” model of global free trade, which favored untrammelled international capitalism, exemplified by moving manufacturing to the countries with the lowest wages and undermining local, national and workers’ power.

If you want a deep dive into how economic power in the world works, Martin Daunton’s *The Economic Government of the World* will give you the framework in both fine detail and sweeping scope. It begins with the Bretton Woods system, the global economic order that came forth from the ashes of World War II. That system incorporated a series of trade rules, such as foreign currency being convertible into U.S. dollars (and dollars to gold), and created the institutions to help integrate, rebuild, and develop the postwar world.

“During the war, [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt’s aim was the construction of liberal world order. He had saved capitalism in the United States by the New Deal,” Daunton writes. “Now he wished to reform the world by spreading American values of free enterprise, personal initiative and responsibility.” Daunton, a University of Cambridge economic history professor, believes the postwar world order was intended to create a stable economic regime that balanced domestic national welfare and global economic integration.

In the postwar era, the American right wing led the challenge to global economic integration, as it campaigned to reject the ratification of Bretton Woods. Ohio Senator Robert Taft, the scion of a leading conservative family who had opposed the New Deal, referred to the Bretton Woods system as pouring money “down a rat hole.” Daunton quotes rightwing descriptions of Bretton Woods as a “nefarious plot to rob the United States of its gold reserves; an attempt to make Uncle Sam the milch cow for the rest of the world.” Wall Street, still smarting from the New Deal’s success, went full gold bug, and the American Bankers Association opposed ratification as well.

Eighty years later, that rhetoric sounds familiar.

This new internationalism also produced the United Nations and its World Health Organization agency, and there was strong emphasis on agriculture and nutrition in war-scarred areas. Roosevelt, acknowledging the Soviet Union’s immense civilian and military sacrifices to turn

back fascism, had hoped to include the Soviet Union and China in the postwar order. He also directed the United States to join the International Labor Organization; however, issues of international labor standards took a back seat to trade, and the Communist countries, which had supposedly ended capitalism, did not see a strong need to contribute to international labor law.

As the world split between the Capitalist West

at \$35 per ounce. Its exchange rate now floated, the Bretton Woods financial system broke down, and a financialized future opened.

The U.S. became a debtor nation in 1986, but a large consumer culture emerged, and global investment flocked stateside, including to U.S. Treasury bonds. Yet President Ronald Reagan’s “morning in America” hadn’t come yet for declining corporate profits. A new economic and financial model was wanted.

Daunton prefers the term “market liberalism” to “neoliberalism.” He defines it as believing that “human relations are based on buying and selling, and that individual self-interest maximizes collective welfare” and that “markets were more efficient and effective than planning, that private property rights were more appropriate than collective ownership, that growth and incentives were more important than questions of distribution and economic security, that the power of capital and finance were superior to labor, and that the pursuit of cosmopolitan capitalism had priority over national capitalism.”

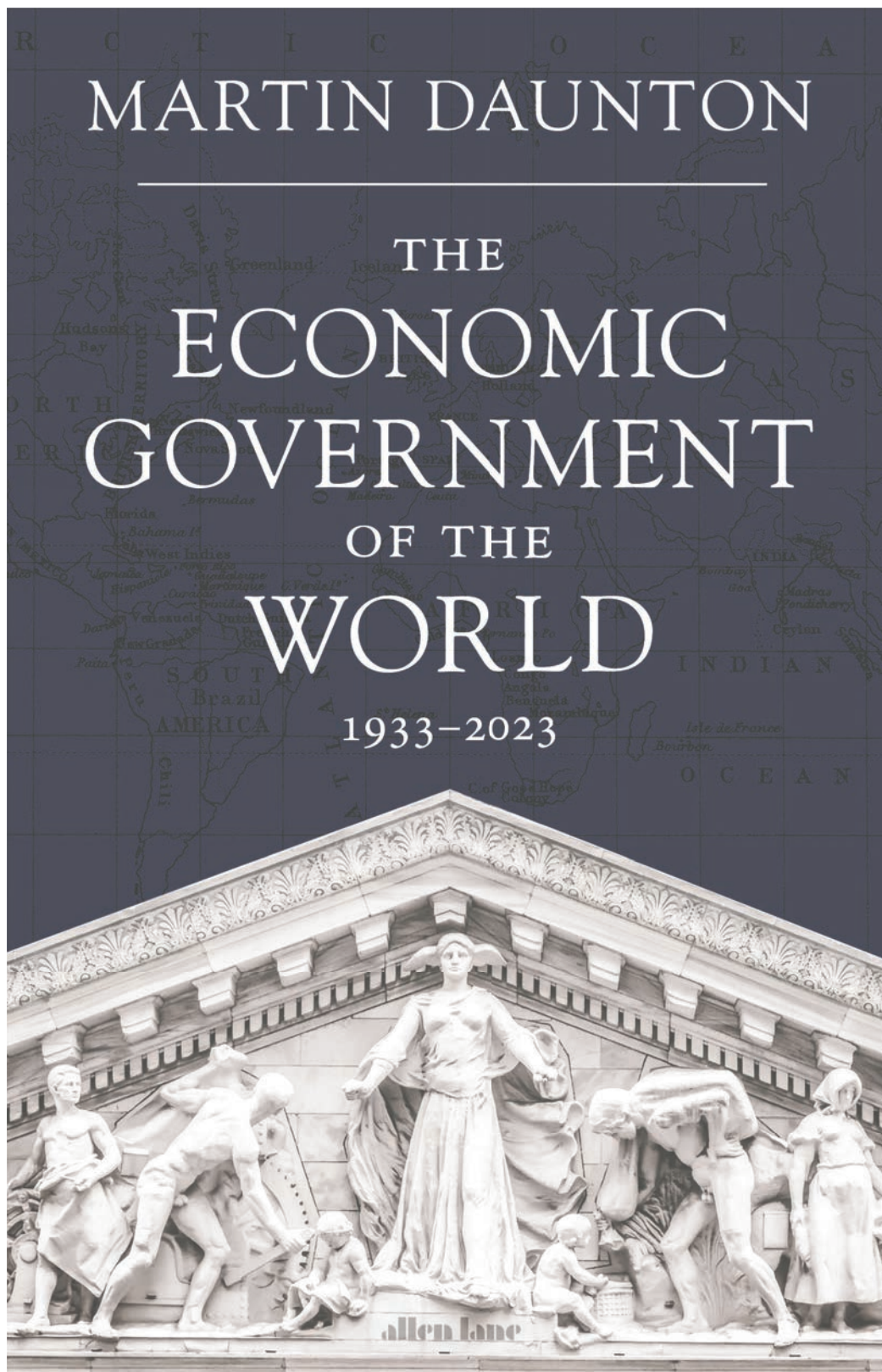
Central banks and financial institutions flexed their muscles. The Federal Reserve jacked up rates to combat the inflation of the late 1970s. The WTO replaced the Bretton Woods system, while the IMF and World Bank made loans during times of national crisis that imposed market-liberalism principles such as slashing public payrolls, cutting social spending, privatizing state-owned industries and general austerity.

The push and pull of internationalism vying with economic nationalism dominates *The Economic Government of the World*. Globalization created winners and losers. Asian economies led by the rise of China and India have closed the inequality gap with the West. The winners have been the global 1% and the middle and working classes in emerging economies, especially in China, where hundreds of millions of people have escaped poverty. The losers were Western industrial workers who lost their jobs and the lower middle class that got mired in low wages, high health insurance and housing costs, and loss of societal solidarity.

Following the 2008 economic crash caused by Wall Street’s rampant speculation in sub-prime mortgages, the economic government of the world’s market liberalism came under increased fire from leftwing anti-austerity movements in the U.S. and Europe, most famously Occupy Wall Street. Meanwhile, rightwing populists redirected popular rage at

immigrants and other easy scapegoats with great success. In England, it led to severing economic ties with the European Union in the name of Brexit while Trump came to power in the U.S. threatening to impose tariffs and wage trade wars that would have been inconceivable a few years earlier.

The 21st century’s challenges of climate change, disease and the specter of nuclear war will need a coordinated global response. *The Economic Government of the World*’s closing chapters confront them. Any resurgent left will have the role of emphasizing international solidarity and mutual aid as the environmental and economic disasters pile up. Rightwing economic nationalism, though, seems to have staying power.



and the Communist East, the Cold War enveloped the developing world, with hot wars in Korea and Vietnam. That provoked criticism of the Bretton Woods system from the Left as updated imperialism. For Daunton, the “embedded liberalism” at the heart of the postwar order balanced internationalism and domestic welfare, and the system rejected Hayekian libertarianism that would have restricted state action and empowered markets. There is not much discussion, however, of the Vietnam War and the violence that underpinned American-led power.

As the Vietnam War dragged on and government deficits mounted, President Richard Nixon’s administration faced other problems. The gold standard necessitated that a country slash prices and labor costs when its balance of payments declined, in order to boost exports. In the summer of 1971, Nixon suspended the dollar’s convertibility to gold

REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS



RICHARD SWAFFORD

Hey Rev,
Jordan Neely never harmed no one, and
the man who choked him to death in the
subway car walked free. The health-in-
surance CEO who got popped in Mid-
town made tons of money off of denying
medical care to sick folks, and his death is
treated like this big tragedy. Do you think
we need to start getting more violent, since
it feels like people in power don't listen to
us when we peacefully protest?

— STEVE

Dear Steve,
No, the violence only leads to more violence.
Now is the time to turn to original visions.
Steve, the "people in power" want us to be-
lieve the only way for us to improve our lives
is through their permission. I favor sepa-
rating from the hard-right guys. Claim our
own culture. That may sound like a dream,
but dreams are the spark for new action.

Black Lives Matter was the movement
that showed us how the progress of African
Americans in the United States has come,
from founding independent Black-only net-
works to creating new culture: Music, cloth-
ing, food, computer programs and farming,
just to name a few.

In our "Church of Stop Shopping"
community, we will continue our protests
against fossil banks. On the other hand,
we owe the federal government and our
Trump-loving mayor absolutely nothing.
All those months of sheltering West Af-
rican asylum seekers in our Earthchxrch
space — we got not a dime from the City.
But volunteers and donations from all over
kept the good thing alive.

We keep us safe!!!

— REVEREND BILLY

Dear Billy,
Winter is always hard for me. This year
feels especially bleak with the election
and everything going on in the world.
Do you have any encouraging words you
can share?

— MARCIA

Dear Marcia,
Look, the days of tying our emotions to peo-
ple who "own the libs" as their avocation...
we got to just walk away from all that.

Practice creating your day as if it has an
architectural life, with walls and windows,
foundation and a roof. Protection from the
bad weather of Trumpism. Inhabit this place
and fill it with your own memories; fill your
"house" with your own memories, your
journals and sketches and poems and love
letters. Walk into your protected private
place and strengthen your relationship with
yourself, and soon you'll find a deepening
of your friendships and even a deepening
of contacts with strangers. (A favorite New
York thing is that we can have completely
revealing conversations with strangers. We
can change our lives in an instant.)

Go on fasts from the little screen. Run in
the park until the laugh-track of corporate
humor fades. Stop and let the things around
you brighten, and the visuals will sharpen —
damn! Look at that! You find you can make
your own rhythm. You won't be afraid to
stop in mid-step and stare at an old detail on
a building or into someone's eyes, or up into
the top branches of a tree.

We are stalked by corporate virtuality.
That may be tougher to throw than Alex
Jones and Steve Bannon. But then — the
hard-right bullies and the corporations of-
ten work in tandem. The fascists are enabled
by corporations that claim to be more liberal
than they really are.

Bottom line: The revolution is to take
your own life seriously. Consumerism needs
you to believe you are not self-sufficient.
But your life can be as entertaining and ex-
pansive and downright fascinating. You are
enough! You are plenty! You are too much!

— REV

REVEREND BILLY TALEN IS THE PASTOR
OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE
A QUESTION FOR THE REVEREND? EMAIL
REVBILLY@REVBILLY.COM AND UNBURDEN
YOUR SOUL.

Theater for the New City JANUARY EVENTS

THE PRIOR 55
by Andrea J. Fulton
DECEMBER 19- JANUARY 5
THURS. to SAT. @8PM,
SUN @3PM

A SHIFT OF OPINION
by Vadim Astrakhan
DECEMBER 19- JANUARY 5
THURS. to SAT. @8PM,
SUN @3PM

THE JESSYCKA ROSE TALK SHOW
by Terry Lee King
DECEMBER 19- JANUARY 5
THURS. to SAT. @8PM,
SUN @3PM

THE GIGGLING GRANNY
by Marsha Lee Sheiness
JANUARY 9- JANUARY 26
THURS. to SAT. @8PM,
SUN @3PM

**50th ANNUAL THUNDERBIRD
AMERICAN INDIAN DANCERS'
POW-WOW AND DANCE CONCERT**
JANUARY 10- JANUARY 19
FRI. & SAT. @8PM,
SAT & SUN @3PM

SHELLEY & LOVELACE NEVER MET
by Becky McKercher & Sarah
Thuswaldner
JANUARY 30- FEBRUARY 16
THURS. to SAT. @8PM,
SUN @3PM

THE SHINE CHALLENGE 2025
by Ishmael Reed
JANUARY 30- FEBRUARY 16
THURS. to SAT. @8PM,
SUN @3PM

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THIS IS HOW WE DO IT

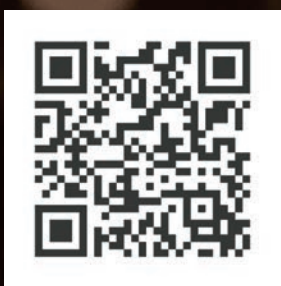
The Independent is reader-funded news. We don't have any deep-pocketed corporations or billionaire backers keeping us afloat. It's the support of readers like yourself that keeps the lights on and the presses rolling. We hold one fund drive each year when we ask our readers for support. This time, we need to raise \$40,000 to ensure we can continue publishing in 2025.

WILL YOU PITCH IN TODAY?

We're going to need independent journalism more than ever in a second Trump administration. Right-wing media is a giant cesspool of conspiracy theories and culture-war slop. Legacy liberal media outlets will defer to whoever is in power. We know these coming days are going to be tough. With your help we'll continue to deliver shoe-leather reporting and incisive analysis of the issues that matter and the grassroots movements here in New York City and beyond that carry the seed of a better world in them.

Your contribution puts this paper in the hands of your fellow New Yorkers. Fifty dollars prints 500 copies of this paper; \$100 = 1,000 copies; \$200 = 2,000 copies. Your support also makes it possible for us to produce a weekly radio show on WBAI-99.5 FM, publish original articles on indypendent.org between print editions, host live events and much more. Please give today!

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INDYPENDENT **TEAM**